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ABSTRACT

This report describes a skills exchange workshop, co-organized by Minority Rights Group International (MRG) and the Liga Pro Europa, on local governance in multi-ethnic communities in Central and Eastern Europe. Civil servants, members of minority communities, non-governmental organization (NGO) activists, and public officials from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia met to analyze the problems they encounter in their own communities and to share ideas and experiences of good practice. The workshop discussion showed that there is an underlying similarity between situations, even though diversity is also apparent. It is impossible to disassociate problems at the local level from their national and international context. Yet, because broader conflicts manifest themselves locally, there is a need to develop systems to manage and to resolve the problems through local governance and public administration. Three main themes emerged at the workshop: (1) the legal and political framework for managing inter-group relations at the local level; (2) the need to address diverse education needs; and (3) the need to ensure that socio-economic development benefits all groups within the community. The report summarizes key discussions and illustrates examples of good practice that were presented. (Includes a list of participants.) (BT)

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Local Governance in Multi-Ethnic Communities of Central and Eastern Europe:

A Skills Exchange Workshop (Romania, April 4-7, 1997)

Workshop Report

Minority Rights Group International

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Local Governance in Multi-ethnic Communities of Central and Eastern Europe

A Skills Exchange Workshop

held 4–7 April 1997, Romania

WORKSHOP REPORT

Background to the workshop

Local government and public administration in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have been transformed since the collapse of communism. For example, many local authorities now have the devolved responsibility of implementing policies to conform with international minority rights standards. Yet these authorities are often hindered in their capacity to respond to local needs due to tight controls by the central government.

A number of countries have made provisions to enact minority rights within the sphere of local administrative districts. Yet these provisions may be poorly implemented due to inadequate resources, insufficient technical expertise and a lack of political will at all levels. There is an urgent need to develop methods to overcome these barriers and to support local governance's ability to meet the specific needs of diverse communities. While communities in other parts of the world also struggle with these issues, methods and approaches must be appropriate to the unique situation of European countries in transition.

Tensions and innovation

While people may be aware of the tensions in inter-ethnic relations in the region, few know of the many innovative approaches that exist to promote multicultural harmony. These good practices can become a source of inspiration for strategies to address persistent problems – if others are aware of them. To support this process, Minority Rights Group International (MRG) and the Liga Pro Europa co-organized a skills exchange workshop on local governance in multi-ethnic communities in the region. Civil servants, members of minority communities, non-governmental organization (NGO) activists and public officials from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia met for four days in Romania in April 1997 to analyze the problems they encounter in their own communities and to share ideas and experiences of good practice.

The workshop discussion showed that there is an underlying similarity between situations, even though diversity is also apparent. Overall, participants realized that it is impossible to disassociate problems at the local level from their national and international context. Yet, because broader conflicts manifest themselves locally, there is a need to develop systems to manage and resolve them through local governance and public administration. Many participants expressed their belief that – at its best – local government is in a better position than central authorities to respond to the diverse needs of multi-ethnic communities. This is due to its capacity to negotiate with different local interest groups and foster a framework of shared local identity. However, there is also a need to ensure that local authorities do not fail in their responsibility to fully protect and promote human and minority rights.

This issue is at the centre of the tension in the transition period between the imperative of the rule of law, and the realization that law operates within a broader social and political context – in which the law is not always implemented. The tension between the law, on the one hand, and politics and society on the other, became clear in the discussion; it emerged

- that local political leaders are sometimes able to develop stronger rights-based policies and practices than existing national legislation and jurisprudence. While local government must obey the law, it is also possible for it to go beyond the minimal level of protection which the law may currently offer.

While participants identified an extremely broad array of concerns among multi-ethnic communities, three main themes emerged:

- The legal and political framework for managing inter-group relations at the local level;
- addressing diverse education needs; and
- ensuring that socio-economic development benefits all groups within the community.

This Workshop Report summarizes some of the key discussions and illustrates some of the examples of good practice that were presented.

The skills exchange workshop methodology

Participants were recruited based on their direct experience of issues related to local governance in multi-ethnic communities and their reputation for a commitment to good practice. In the workshop, facilitated discussions encouraged joint analysis and problem-solving. On the first evening, participants identified the key issues that are most problematic in their work. On the second day, participants analyzed the issues identified, discussed the relationships between the issues and chose the three topics to be explored in greater depth. The third day focused on the problems and shared strategies for solutions to the three priority topics. On the final day, participants discussed conclusions and future activities, both in country-specific groups and in a full plenary session. Discussion was enabled by simultaneous interpretation in five languages.

Participants found this type of meeting valuable because they were able to determine the agenda and discuss the issues most important to them. They also stressed the importance of developing links with others trying to address similar problems, both within and across countries. They anticipated that they would stay in contact with other participants.

The legal and political framework for management of minority/majority relations

The intersection of law, politics, and structures of public administration was a major focus. Participants discussed issues ranging from the importance of local government in implementing law at the local level, to structural arrangements for promoting the political representation of minority interests, to tensions around decentralization of power and administrative responsibilities, and the various integrating functions of local government and local identity.

The rule of law and political will

Participants agreed that all CEE societies are multicultural. Yet the position of minorities within these societies is dependent on the willingness of political regimes to acknowledge this multiculturalism. This has led members of minority groups and others to demand legal and institutional guarantees of their rights.

While CEE states are moving towards becoming constitutional democracies based on the respect of human rights, participants noted that, in practice, rights are not protected evenly in every country or for every minority. Many participants pointed out that implementation of minority rights in particular, has depended largely on political will at both the national and local levels. Some argued that this problem can only be remedied through the rule of law. This led to the question of whether the implementation of law is possible without the necessary political will, particularly in the transition period.

A participant from Hungary said that the legal framework should emerge as the expression of political will through the legislative process, where all the diverse interests that constitute the society should have an opportunity to participate. He emphasized the need for control mechanisms to ensure that the resulting legal provisions are implemented at all levels. This is particularly important because most policies that impact on the everyday life of minorities are implemented at the local level.

Some Bulgarian and Slovakian participants were concerned that governmental control mechanisms may only be effective in strong democracies. Therefore social controls that emerge out of a strong civil society, e.g. from community or media pressure, are necessary for the effective guarantee of rights and the rule of law.

A local public official from Romania pointed out that sometimes legal solutions are not necessarily the best means to tackle problems found in diverse communities. Law is, in effect, the lowest common denominator of a society. It lacks the sensitivity to manage real life situations and good solutions usually go beyond legal norms. He claimed that local officials

Market scene in Sofia, Bulgaria.

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must often rely on their own creativity to devise solutions that are responsive to local needs – usually through negotiation, with outcomes that address the needs of both majority and minority communities. Another participant countered that while it may be true that measures developed locally can offer better protection for minorities than national policies; conversely, there is also a risk that local authorities, due to their particular interests, may refuse to harmonize their policies and practices with national or international standards and offer inferior protection.

Participants discussed the variety of control mechanisms that can be used to ensure that minority rights are protected and the law is implemented at local and national levels. Monitoring by rights-based NGOs, the media, and, more generally, by voters, can put pressure on public officials. Direct or indirect involvement of minorities in decision-making processes can serve as a preventive measure. Seeking legal remedies through administrative and constitutional courts can be an effective means of enforcement. Ombudsman offices can help ensure implementation.

The Hungarian Ombudsman on National and Ethnic Minority Rights

The Parliamentary Commissioner (Ombudsman) for National and Ethnic Minority Rights was elected in 1995. The main role is to examine inconsistencies and violations of minority rights law in both individual and collective cases, based on petitions from complainants. The Ombudsman has the authority to investigate any government or public office and request documents, explanation, information or opinion regarding the investigations. The aim is to use the most expedient, goal-oriented and least bureaucratic methods to ensure a favourable solution to the petitioner's claim. In the event of finding discrimination, the Ombudsman may make recommendations to redress violations or determine possible culpability.

Models of local administrative and governance arrangements

Another crucial issue participants identified concerned the structural and practical arrangements that might ensure the representation of minorities in political decisions at the local level. They identified two basic models. The **co-administrative model** has a single, centralized body of local government and public administration in which minorities can participate along with others; and the **cooperative model** where minorities have their own institutions through which they cooperate with the institutions of the majority.

Participants debated which model is more effective. One participant said that the success of the co-administrative model may be dependent, in part, on the degree of minority representation among administrative staff and elected officials. The composition of local government should reflect the composition of the whole community. Minorities will then have more opportunities to generate understanding and responsiveness to their concerns. They may also have more opportunities for effective participation in decision-making and implementation, participating as equals.

Another participant felt that the cooperative model may be better suited to the preservation of group identity because minorities can elect to voluntarily create separate institutions that permit group development. Someone else cautioned that separate institutions can exacerbate tensions between the majority and minority groups, and, at its most extreme, can serve to enforce segregation between ethnic communities.

Roma residing in a neighbourhood of Miskolc, Hungary

In Hungary, the cooperative model has been established through legislation that provides for autonomous minorities self-governments at the local and national level. According to several participants, the effects of this arrangement have been mixed, mainly because budgeting constraints have frequently created competition between the minorities' local self-governments and the local authorities. (See below.)

Minority self-government system in Hungary

Minorities are recognized in the Hungarian Constitution as 'state-constituent factors', as holders of decision-making rights in the enforcement and implementation of law. These rights are exercised through a system of minority self-governments closely connected to the system of public administration. These are elected bodies that have a right of consent over issues that are of primary concern to minorities, such as culture, education, languages and the media. On other matters which directly affect them they are given consultative rights. These bodies may also establish and maintain cultural and educational institutions.

Since 1994, 792 **local minority self-governments** have formed, of which 451 are Roma (gypsy) and 163 are German; 11 minorities have also formed **national minority self-governments**. Some claim that these bodies have become legitimate negotiating partners with the Hungarian government and have been an effective channel for promoting ethnic identity and culture. Serious concerns have been raised, however, about the financing of the self-governments. They are often dependent on relations with local authorities and must compete with them at the local level for allocation of scarce funds. This competition has been known to create hostility between majority and minority members. Also, without resources, minority self-governments cannot fulfil the needs and expectations of their members. This can sometimes be exacerbated by a lack of experience and expertise, both among local authorities and local minority representatives.

Roma self-governments have frequently had the worst difficulties. Due to their communities' socio-economic position, they are responding to problems that go beyond the functions for which they were created, such as distributing social aid, fighting discrimination and racism, and organizing measures against unemployment.

Minority representation in local level decision-making

An observer from the United Kingdom (UK) raised concerns about typical problems of minority representation within elected bodies. In practice, local election procedures often impede the representation of minorities' interests and preserve the representation of influential groups or individuals' views.

A participant from Poland noted that dispersed minority groups are particularly at a disadvantage when there are no compensatory mechanisms to support their representation. In Poland, minorities can only achieve political representation in areas where compact minority groups represent the local majority. Therefore Germans and Roma have no direct political representation as communities at either the national or local levels.

The situation of the Roma, in particular, was raised by several participants. According to a Roma civil rights activist from Hungary, their effective political representation is extremely weak. This is because most Roma live in fragmented communities, struggling against discrimination and the Roma leaders are not sufficiently unified to counter this problem. It is therefore important that local governments support the local Roma community and the development of civil society so as to strengthen the basis for self-organization and political representation. He noted that there are some positive trends in Hungary in the fields of education and political empowerment. However, he pointed out that previous governments have treated the Roma and their self-governments as inferiors, rather than as equal partners. He argued nevertheless that Roma share common interests with the broader society in which they live and must therefore be integrated into government at both the central and local levels.

A participant from Slovakia said that in his country, the Roma have been represented by several political parties. These parties have had little electoral success in either national or local elections. He felt that forming political parties on an ethnic basis may not be effective because ethnic minority communities are subdivided into different interest groups, including socio-economic and other divides. He argued that mainstream political parties should take on minority concerns and run candidates from different ethnic groups.

It was observed that participation in decision-making depends on the demographic composition of the group. In areas where the majority is numerically dominant, minorities must have a voice in decision processes. When the minority is dominant in an area, the issue becomes the way in which this area interacts with the larger state. One participant argued that when decision-making occurs through political processes, problems can be addressed most easily when there are minority representatives addressing the full spectrum of political issues at the local, regional, and central levels. The challenge for local authorities is to manage the tensions and promote development in a way that represents the plurality of local society.

Public administration and decentralization: the subsidiarity principle

In most CEE countries, the democratization of the political sphere and the privatization of the economy have been accompanied by reforms in public administration. This process has been marked by tension between the central government and local authorities over who will have competency over specific areas of public life. In most countries, reform has involved varying degrees of decentralization, although power has at times oscillated between central and local authorities. Participants explored the extent to which decentralization promotes the participation of minority communities in public administration and governance.

One participant argued that decentralized systems facilitate minority representation and said that, in general, the subsidiarity principle – when decisions are taken at the lowest appropriate level – is the best form of governance to address minority/majority issues. Another participant agreed, but argued that there is no pre-set, 'ideal model' between fully centralized and fully decentralized systems. The best arrangements develop when minorities are able to participate in the process of renegotiating subsidiarity arrangements within the new structures of public administration.

Identity, community, and conflict prevention

Most participants agreed that problems are not caused by the existence of different identities within a society, but arise when authorities promote and privilege one identity over others. Participants decided that membership of the state should be based on citizenship rather than on a particular ethnic (or 'national') identity.

According to a participant from Romania, this implies that the local community consists of all the inhabitants – regardless of their ethnic identity. A key role of local government is to support a common local identity that generates a local community and a peaceful, multicultural coexistence. Strong communities are better able to solve their problems than weak, fragmented communities.

Another participant questioned this idea, claiming that it might not be appropriate for the different dynamics present in areas with large populations where people may have less opportunities to come into contact. Here, it may be more difficult to 'integrate' different cultures into a common local community identity. Other participants pointed out that mobility of the population is another factor that can add to the difficulty of creating a common local community. It appears that the characteristics of local identity are dependent upon the size of the community, the mobility of its population, and its own unique history and circumstances.

Some cautioned that there might be a danger of trying to engineer local identity artificially. Another commented that while local government should not interfere with individual identities, which tend to be complex and diverse, it must manage the background structures that facilitate an overarching civic identity. Legal guarantees are particularly important to protect identities where there is a conflict of interests, such as in the use of minorities' own languages; local government must provide this protection.

Others said that in addition to legal protection, citizens must take responsibility for their own attitudes and behaviour. Mutual respect is essential for peaceful cohabitation. Some argued that while the majority must respect the lifestyles and values of the minority, minorities must also extend the same respect to the majority. There was some debate about how this respect operates in public spaces, such as a street or local park, where different traditions and lifestyles can come into conflict. One participant suggested that common rules must govern public spaces, but that there should be no interference or violation of private space. However, no agreement was reached on how these common rules should be defined or on who decides what constitutes 'public' versus 'private' space.

Participants also discussed the role of public celebrations and how they reflect history and cultural values. Such celebrations can reinforce the sense of a divided society when they are seen

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to represent the values of one group over another. Yet they can be opportunities for reconciliation between groups. Because local authorities are often in the position of sanctioning or even sponsoring these events, they can play an important role in bringing people together. A participant from Romania suggested that by reinterpreting historic themes in a contemporary context, it is possible to generate reciprocity and integration. Yet it was pointed out that this may only be possible if the participating groups share common values. It may also depend on the particular political leadership present in a community.

Community celebrations and reconciliation in Romania

Hungarian and Romanian people have historically had sensitivities to the mutually traumatic events related to their separate nation states, celebrated on 1 December for Romanians and 15 March for Hungarians. Traditionally it has not been possible to find a common way to symbolically interpret these events and each holiday has tended to mark the grievances between the communities. Several years ago, a member of the Hungarian minority who is a county councillor in Romania gave a speech at the official celebration on 1 December; he gave a new interpretation of the celebration, framing it as the birthday of the modern Romanian state: a state of all its citizens. A similar gesture occurred this year when Romania's Prime Minister sent a letter of greeting to all Hungarians on 15 March.

A participant from Poland described how community development and local government can help reconcile different groups.

A school in Stolipinovo, in a suburb of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, where most pupils are Roma or Turkish-speaking

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Inter-communal cooperation in Poland

Members of the German minority in Poland live in the region around Opole. The relationship between Germans and Poles has been strongly influenced by mutual, historical antagonisms. However, prejudices have recently been challenged by the 'Regional Development Strategies Project'. In 1994, local leaders began to form a common development plan for the region. Because all residents have a stake in this, local authorities have been able to build cooperation between Poles and Germans at regular meetings based on shared interests. This process has formed a common community incorporating the German minority and Polish majority and is generating a gradual shift in attitudes.

Education in diverse communities

Participants identified education as the second major focus area and discussed issues related to education for minority group members and education for understanding. Many of the issues raised by participants are regulated through central government policy; yet, because the application of these policies impacts on local community needs, participants felt that local authorities should develop ways of addressing these issues. They analyzed tensions between central and local authorities in educational provision; dilemmas over whether separate or integrated schools and classrooms better serve children from minority groups; and approaches through education for promoting understanding, multiculturalism, and group identity. Education for Roma children was seen to be one of the most sensitive and urgent issues in the field of education.

Education for children from minority communities

A number of participants commented that educational institutions appear to be slow to respond to the new political and social environment. There have been few changes in the legal framework in which educational institutions operate. Policies and practices are also still generally directed by central government. This means that local authorities are limited in their capacity to respond to local needs.

According to a participant from Romania, the tensions between centralization and decentralization in education result from two antagonistic tendencies. On the one hand, there are strong political interests with a stake in a conservative, centralized system. This interest develops out of the perception of education as a state security concern because it is through education that the state reproduces the intellectual capacity and national identity of the next generation of its citizens. Yet, on the other hand, the education system plays a crucial role in developing both the specific skills and general attitudes that are necessary for a marketable workforce. This implies a modernizing impetus both culturally and technically. The participant argued that local authorities are often in a much better position to assess the potential workforce and social needs of their communities. Therefore, education should also be decentralized.

Some participants expressed doubts over the feasibility of this given the political environment in their countries. Others countered that while radical educational reform may be unlikely, there are still opportunities for local authorities to encourage solutions that address the gap between local demands and the mainstream educational provisions offered by the state. Such mechanisms might involve supplementary teacher training programmes or cooperation with NGOs or businesses to provide alternatives to state education. Most participants seemed to agree that in the long-term, local communities should have a key role in the educational system because institutions tend to perform better if they are controlled by the community that uses them.

Institutional cooperation to satisfy minority educational needs

The Hungarian minority in Romania has developed the following strategies to satisfy their educational needs through cooperative arrangements with institutions in other countries:

- Hungarian university students participated in exchange programmes with universities in Hungary, the Netherlands and Switzerland.
- Hungarian-language summer university programmes on history, language and literature were developed for students from the minority and the majority and provided opportunities for exchange for scholars from Hungary and Romania.
- The Hungarian Reformed Church supported language schools that provided training for approximately 700 people at a reasonable price.
- Public and private institutions from Hungary organized schools for the local public in Romania.

Many participants were concerned with the politicization of the education system, especially regarding minority issues. A participant from Slovakia commented that in his country, 96 per cent of all schools are state-run. Central government controls virtually all aspects of the education system and parents, pupils, and teachers have little or no influence over its form and content. The teachers are employees of the state and not of their local community. This has become a sensitive issue due to perceptions that their employment contracts make them vulnerable to political misuse. There are also problems regarding the language of education. Students from minority groups do not receive instruction in their mother tongue at primary and secondary school, because these languages are taught only as foreign languages. Conflict is also generated over perceptions of ethnic bias in the curriculum with claims that key subjects for forming identity are taught from the perspective of the majority.

A participant from Hungary who represents the German community said that Germans constitute one third of Hungary's minority population. Their two main concerns are the arrangements for education in the mother tongue and the financing of education for minorities. They want provisions for bilingual education because they believe they must be fluent in Hungarian as well as German to be successful. They also want to maintain links with Germany and take advantages of its cultural resources. He argued strongly that the state must finance education which meets minority communities' needs because minorities are full citizens of a given country and fulfil their responsibilities such as paying taxes and obeying the law.

According to a participant from Bulgaria, specific provisions for minority education are not considered by the state to be part of its obligations. He cited the case of the Pomak community. They are not allowed to form their own schools and even in areas where they constitute the majority, the language of instruction is Bulgarian. According to this participant, Pomak's cultural links with Turkey are discouraged because they

represent a "national security risk". These controls are seen as serious barriers to the preservation and development of a distinct Pomak identity.

Most participants acknowledged the importance of instruction in the mother tongue to protect and promote group identity. There were heated discussions on the different types of arrangements for minority education and the language of instruction. Participants agreed that no one type of education is preferable in all circumstances, instead authorities should be flexible and responsive to opportunities. Three types of arrangements were identified:

- Minority languages taught as a foreign language, rather than as the medium of instruction;
- bilingual education in integrated institutions; and
- education in the mother tongue in separate institutions.

Several participants were concerned about the danger of promoting separate institutions. A participant from Poland argued that integrated institutions should be able to allow children from all groups to develop their own identity and become familiar with people from other groups. Integrated institutions could also help children to adapt to multi-ethnic environments. A participant from Hungary said that separate and integrated forms of minority education could be offered in parallel, so that parents can choose where to send their children. Others claimed that while this might be ideal, there are likely to be practical difficulties due to the scarce resources available for education.

Arrangements for minority education: two controversial cases from Poland

The 1993 Polish law on minority languages provides minorities with the right to education in minority languages if at least six families request it. They can establish and maintain separate institutions for pre-school, elementary, and secondary education.

However, the German community has experienced problems with the implementation of this law because local authorities resist opening minority classes. The German minority association tried to address this by organizing parents to make an official claim for minority language education. When this failed, they opened their own school in a village where ethnic Germans form the majority. The Ministry of Education, however, refuses to finance this school. The association is now working to develop other sources of finance.

The Lithuanian minority has been able to establish its own schools. The only subjects taught in Polish are history and the Polish language, all other subjects are in Lithuanian. Yet because university entrance exams are conducted only in Polish, pupils from the Lithuanian language schools experience difficulties in passing tests requiring knowledge of specialized terms in Polish. Many are now calling for the development of complementary measures that can ensure equal opportunities in higher education.

Roma in Cluj Napoca, Romania.

Arrangements for educational success and cultural development in Roma communities

A number of participants believe that the issues are different in educational arrangements for Roma children. A participant described the situation in Hungary where, for example, the form of education for Roma is generally considered to be a 'pedagogical problem' rather than an issue related to the protection of identity. Segregated classes for Roma are offered by many local authorities as a form of social intervention, yet their quality is often poor, affecting the future life chances of the children.

A participant from Bulgaria claimed that few Roma parents request Romani as the medium of instruction for their children. He believes that this is through fear that it would be disadvantageous to their children's futures. A Roma participant from Bulgaria pointed out that few Roma complete secondary and higher education. He attributes this in part to the low standard of schools attended by most Roma children. He believes that the solution lies in special pre-school programmes that equip Roma children with a knowledge of Bulgarian and prepare them to enter mainstream primary schools that meet the national standard.

A participant from Romania agreed with this analysis. While he feels that this would be best accomplished in pre-schools, there are currently no provisions for these schools in Romania. His local authority does, however, offer Roma classes at the entry level to primary school. It allows Roma children to adapt to the school's requirements in a supportive environment without the stress of rejection or discrimination from other students. Teachers in these pre-school programmes are professionals, often from the Roma community, who are paid from the normal school budget.

A participant from Slovakia said that low educational attainment is often related to Roma's poor knowledge of Slovakian. Here, pre-schools allow children to learn Slovakian to address this difficulty. He argued that Roma identity and culture can be promoted through alternative cultural institutions that also serve as a focus for developing the Roma community.

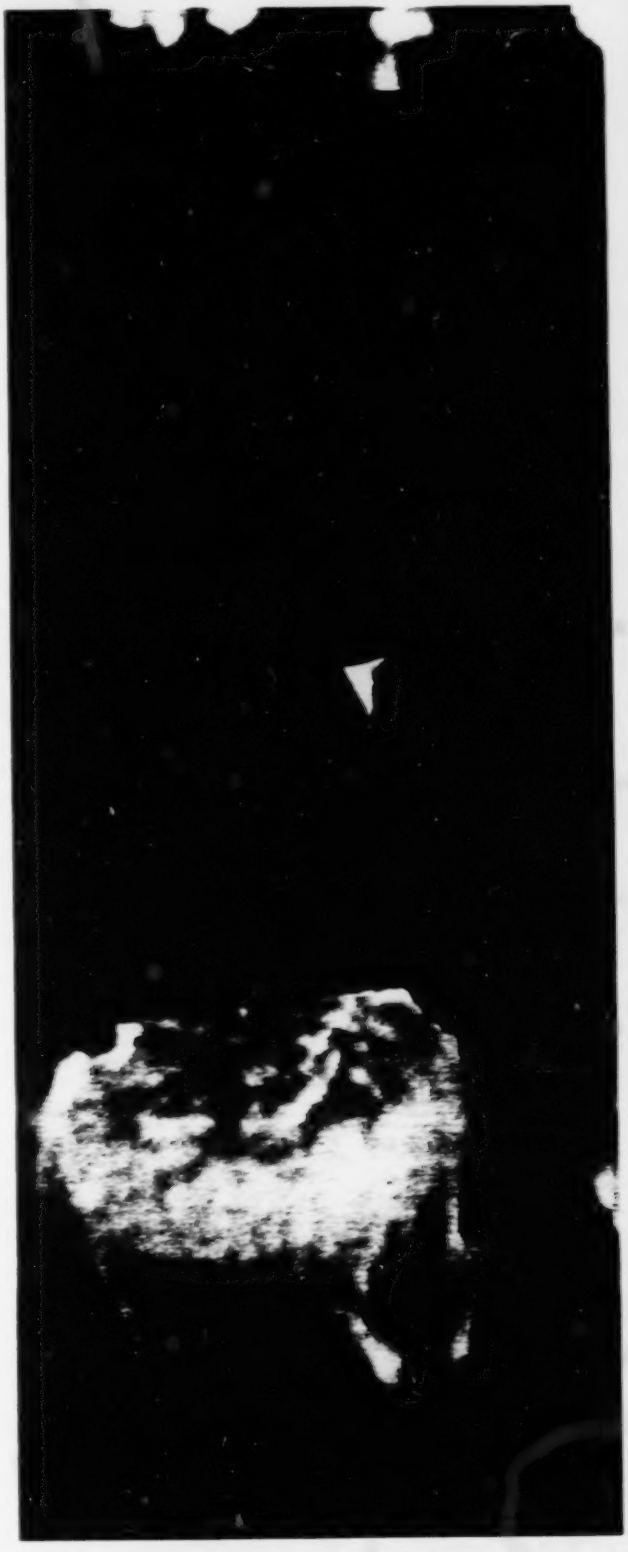
Theatre Romanthan of Kosice, Slovakia

A Roma theatre ensemble, the first of its kind, was formed in Slovakia in 1992 with the support of the Ministry of Culture. A number of adult and adolescent groups perform for a variety of audiences. The theatre has helped to raise awareness of Roma culture among members of other groups and to build positive self-images within the Roma community.

According to a Roma leader from Hungary, it is also very important to create institutions that further the development of a Roma intelligentsia. A participant from Slovakia agreed with this and pointed to the development of a university Chair of Roma Studies.

The 'Romaversitas' programme, Hungary

In 1996, the Hungarian-based Foundation for Roma Civil Rights launched a long-term educational programme called 'Romaversitas' to enhance the participation and professional development of Roma students in higher education. Romaversitas offers personalized training for its students through a tutorial system. There are monthly meetings of students and professors from a variety of disciplines, including cultural anthropology, history, law, pedagogy, political science and sociology. The long-term goal is the establishment of a Central European Roma University.



Hungarian woman selling cheese at a market in Transylvania, Romania.

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'Education for tolerance'/intercultural education

In addition to concerns about the educational arrangements for members of minority communities, most participants agreed on the need for education to promote understanding. This is especially important because of the common perception in majority communities that they are somehow 'sponsoring' minority cultures (despite minorities also being taxpayers). Participants felt that majorities may frequently be willing to tolerate the existence of minorities but resist any manifestation of their identity. The task, therefore, is to educate majorities to understand minorities' histories and contexts, while also providing legal and institutional guarantees for the protection of minority rights. Many strategies may be needed to achieve this, including the development of appropriate curricula and teaching materials, special classroom activities and teachers' training programmes. The aim is to raise consciousness, fight prejudice and stereotypes, and promote understanding in a multicultural environment.

Once institutionalized, programmes can have lasting effects. Liga Pro Europa in Romania, for example, operates a 'Democracy College' as a civic education project which has mixed groups of students working together on a variety of topics. They noticed that with the third generation of students, a multicultural community was gradually forming.

Several participants pointed to the role that local government can play in selecting or creating educational curricula that includes and demonstrates the contributions of minorities. Participants from Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia countered this with the difficulties they have experienced in proposing alternative curricula. Yet most agreed that it might be possible to cooperate with NGOs and other institutions in meeting these aims.

Education for understanding: teachers' training programme, Opole, Poland

The Opole Center for Local Democracy has launched a teachers' training programme to help eliminate discrimination and exclusion in schools. Regular meetings were organized for teachers working in ethnically mixed areas. They received lectures on the culture and history of minority groups and of the Opole region, as well as instruction on teaching methods appropriate for mixed classrooms. They also took part in weekend sessions featuring simulation exercises to develop a deeper and more personal understanding of the issues. The programme has achieved tangible results, as demonstrated by pre- and post-training surveys of attitudes over a four-year period that showed a marked decrease in prejudiced and stereotypical views among teachers.

Social and economic development: approaches for empowering minorities

Local authorities have a range of responsibilities for promoting social and economic development in their community. Participants acknowledged that many complex issues must be addressed if socio-economically disadvantaged minorities are to benefit equally from development. This is particularly important when groups have both identity-protection needs and socio-economic disadvantages. Participants discussed the dilemmas of developing special programmes for minorities.

One participant pointed out that there are two contradictory tendencies in post-communist societies. The establishment of democratic governance and society has often been at odds with the neo-liberal methods of economic transition that have resulted in the impoverishment of many people. Some minorities, especially Roma, have been among the most vulnerable. While most governments run social assistance programmes for Roma, many of these resources do not actually benefit them. Sometimes this is because the authorities responsible are afraid of the backlash that could come from other citizens if they implemented these programmes.

Another participant said that visible support for specific minority communities can trigger hostility among members of other groups who believe that minorities are receiving unfair privileges – even though the minority as a whole may clearly be disadvantaged. Thus development projects can stimulate conflict, even though they are needed. Programmes for Roma have often encountered this resistance. Another participant suggested that it may be best to involve minority and majority representatives to conceive, plan, and implement programmes so that they are well understood. It was argued that this approach could foster a sense of shared responsibility and enhance the community as a whole.

Participants discussed practices that could address these problems, including local authorities cooperating with minority rights and development-oriented NGOs to provide services.

Land cultivation and school nutrition programmes for Roma in Lom, Bulgaria

In 1996 the Roma-Lom Foundation launched a land cultivation project to provide work for low-skilled, unemployed Roma and food for their families. They approached the local government for permission to farm unused public lands surrounding the town and were given a three-year land use permit free of charge. They then arranged for a private agricultural company to prepare the land for cultivation at a very low price. Subsequently they recruited labourers from Roma neighbourhoods. Next, 250 Roma families (1,250 people) were selected on the basis of their motivation and were given plots for farming with their own seeds on a self-sufficiency basis. The Foundation assisted with agricultural expertise when requested. An agreement with the Labour Bureau has made it possible to employ 45 Roma as land guards during the two-month harvesting period.

The Foundation has also worked to address the problem of Roma children dropping out of primary school because of growing poverty among their families. They identified food as a critical need among these children and arranged for breakfast and a hot lunch to be served in schools. The Foundation worked with businesses, the local government and school officials to arrange the programme. A local bakery provides breakfast with flour that is supplied by the municipality, and teachers and a Foundation representative distribute the breakfast. Lunch is prepared from food bought cheaply from local stores. The Labour Bureau employs three Roma women to prepare the food. The programme is sponsored primarily by aid money, but parents contribute a very small amount for the meals. The total budget is (US) $23,000.

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Difficulties can arise when local authorities decide to implement social development programmes without local people's participation. While technocratic approaches to policy design may seek to be 'ethnically neutral', communities should be involved if conflicts are to be prevented.

In several Bulgarian towns, local authorities and civil organizations have worked together to develop a holistic programme to tackle the complex issues that are experienced by low-income Roma neighbourhoods. One of the most important features is that the technical experts have worked with Roma community residents as consultants to the project.

The Anti-Ghetto Programme in Sliven and Asenovgrad, Bulgaria

Roma have been particularly affected by the economic changes of the post-communist years. Seven years of hesitation between a centrally-planned and a market economy has led to unemployment and cuts in social support. Conditions in some Roma neighbourhoods, in particular, have worsened considerably. Conflict between Roma and other groups has increased. The Anti-Ghetto Programme was initiated to counteract the economic, physical, psychological and social *ghettoization* of Roma neighbourhoods in Sliven, a large industrial town, and Asenovgrad, a small, provincial town.

One project is designed to address housing issues using participatory consultation. The opinions and needs of Roma inhabitants about employment, housing, lifestyles and social conditions were surveyed by representatives of local Roma organizations. This information was used to design a planning model and urban housing that would be responsive to the needs and values of residents. One tangible result of this assessment has been the development of architectural plans that are currently being tested in a pilot housing project. This development will also be used for fundraising and for making legal and administrative provisions for self-ownership that can be used in future projects.

Conclusions

Towards the end of the workshop, participants reflected on the broader context of inter-group relations in the CEE region. Some pointed out that peaceful cohabitation and multiculturalism have a long tradition in the region, although people outside have often only been aware of the problems. One participant commented that national identity is not static, it continues to change and develop. The direction of change in majority/minority identities may depend on the state of inter-group relations and, in particular, whether the majority tries to force the minority into submission. New identities may now emerge that do not rest on one culture or one language, but on a complex interaction with the many elements present in a country or region. These identities can be positively fostered through common values, ideas and celebrations. Yet this may only be possible if there is already a basis of trust and reciprocity between groups, because then individuals will want to share with each other.

One participant observed that as European integration deepens, a fundamental shift will occur in the traditional understanding of majority/minority relations. Europe will become the superstructure through which each 'nation' becomes, in effect, a minority within the larger community. This should radically alter our understanding of the 'nation state' and may transform the position of groups that have been a minority within the state.

Another participant commented on minorities' special role in promoting multicultural societies. Both practically and at a social-psychological level, the multiple identities that members of minority groups are often forced to develop may be the source of new attitudes and ideas that can support coexistence and cooperation. One of the barriers to this is the lack of contact and exchange between different minority and majority groups in the region.

Participants agree that there is a need for an infrastructure of communication that allows for a cross-fertilization of ideas and practices within and between countries of the region. However, participants believe that the CEE's specific problems are best addressed through problem-solving from within the region.

It is hoped that this skills-exchange workshop has served as a catalyst for networking to develop creative solutions in the future.

List of participants

Bulgaria

Shaban Mehmed Asan	Satovca Municipal Council, President.
Nikolai Angelov Kirilov	Lom Montana, Municipal Specialist in Minority Relations, and Chair of the Lom-Roma Foundation.
Lyutvi Ahmed Mestan	Municipality of Momchilgrad, Department of Culture and Health, Head of Education.
Rositza Valentinowa Nikolova	Council of Asenegrad, Head of the Department for Healthcare and Social Services.
Mitko Minkov Tsvetovski	Deputy Mayor on Social Policy, Plovdiv.

Hungary

Koloman Brenner	Member of the Presidential Board, Adviser on International Relations, National Self-Government of the German Minority in Hungary.
Aladár Horvath	Foundation for Roma Civil Rights, Director.
Lászlóné Jakabfi	Esztergár Lajos Institute for Social Services and Support of Families.
Jenö Kaltenbach	Parliamentary Commissioner (Ombudsman) for National and Ethnic Minority Rights.
Péró Lásztity	Self-Government of Serbs in Hungary, President.

Poland

Piotr Bajda	Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Head of the Department for National Minorities.
Danuta Berlinska	Silesian Research Institute, Former Plenipotentiary Head of Regional Public Administration for National Minorities.
Eugeniusz Mironowicz	*Niva* (weekly journal of the Belarusian minority), Editor in Chief.

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Waldemar Piontek	Polish Union of German Social and Cultural Organizations, Head of Legal Department and Council of Strzelce Opolskie City, Senior Adviser on Culture and Education.
Bozena Szymanska	Kashubian Student Club, Teacher of Kashubian language.

Romania

Gabriel Andreescu	Romanian Helsinki Committee – APADOR-CH, Director.
Ioan Boldor	Christian Association of Roma in Romania, Secretary.
Gabor Kolumbán	Hargita County Council, President.
Cristina Munteanu	Sibiu County Council, Expert on Ethnic Relations and Media, Department for European Integration.

Slovakia

Rudolf Bauer	Deputy Mayor of Kosice.
Pál Csáky	Hungarian Christian Democrat Movement in Slovakia, Vice-Chair.
László Hóka	Hungarian Christian Democrat Movement in Slovakia, Secretary-General.
Árpád Öllös	Hungarian Civic Party, Member of the Leadership.
Vladimir Vallo	Deputy Mayor of Ivanka pri Dunaji.

Catherine Barnes	*Co-organizer and Facilitator* MRG International, Programme Coordinator: Europe/FSU/Americas (UK).
Anna-Mária Bíró	*Co-organizer and Facilitator* MRG International, Project Manager, Central and Eastern European Initiative, Budapest Coordination Office (UK).
Martin Emerson	*Facilitator* MRG International, Roma 'INTRINSIC' Programme (UK).
Judit-Andrea Kacsó	*Co-organizer and Interpreter* Liga Pro Europa, Programme Assistant (Romania).
Petra Kovács	*Workshop Rapporteur* European Roma Rights Center (Hungary).
Elek Szokoly	*Co-organizer* Liga Pro Europa, Executive Director (Romania).
Viola Zentai	*Observer* Acting Director, Local Government and PublicService Reform Initiative (affiliated with the Open Society Institute), (Hungary).

Turkish tobacco worker in factory in Dzhebel, near Kardzhali, Bulgaria.

This workshop was an activity of the CEE Initiative. This is a three-year programme coordinated by MRG International and nine regional NGOs and academic institutions from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia who are working together to promote minority rights and the development of pluralistic democracies in the region.

Participants for this workshop were recruited by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Poland, the Inter-Ethnic Initiative for Human Rights in Bulgaria, and Minority Rights Group-Slovakia. Future skills exchange workshops will be organized on topics including education in diverse communities, minority participation and socio-economic development.

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The views expressed in this Workshop Report represent a summary of the views of the individual participants and do not necessarily reflect those of MRG International.

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Minority Rights Group International

MRG is an international research, education and information unit which aims to secure justice for minority and majority groups suffering discrimination and prejudice. We aim to educate and alert public opinion throughout the world, both through our publications and our work at the UN.

MRG is funded by contributions from individuals and organizations and through the sales of its Reports and other publications. It needs further financial support if it is to continue with its important work monitoring and informing on the human rights situation.

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For full details contact

Minority Rights Group International
379 Brixton Road
London SW9 7DE
UK

Telephone: + 44 (0) 171 978 9498
Fax: + 44 (0) 171 738 6265
E-Mail:
minority.rights@mrg.sprint.com
Web site: www.minorityrights.org

***Front cover photo (left): Haskovo, Bulgaria.** Sweets are passed around at the opening ceremony for Haskovo's restored mosque which was damaged by arson in 1990.*
MELANIE FRIEND/PANOS PICTURES

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